



Towards Inclusive Education, Religion, and Citizenship: Multiculturalism and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Chhimey Dolker Lhawon^{1*}

Pathsala Nepal Foundation, Kathmandu, Nepal

*Correspondence: E-mail: chhimey333@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the challenges and transformative possibilities of multiculturalism within Nepal's socio-political and educational frameworks, focusing on historically marginalized groups such as Dalits, Janjatis, Madhesis, women, religious minorities, and linguistic communities. Using qualitative literature analysis grounded in theories of identity politics and multicultural citizenship, the paper explores structural inequalities in language policy, citizenship laws, and education systems that perpetuate elite dominance. It aligns the analysis with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) to advocate for inclusive reforms. The findings highlight the need for multilingual education, gender-equitable citizenship rights, interfaith understanding, and community-based governance to advance social justice and civic empowerment. The paper argues that multiculturalism should be viewed not as a threat to national unity but as a foundation for inclusive citizenship, religious harmony, and sustainable development in Nepal. Through these lenses, the study proposes pathways for equity-driven policy transformation and cohesive nation-building.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Multiculturalism, both as a political philosophy and a public policy framework, has gained increasing global relevance in the context of expanding ethnic, linguistic, religious, and cultural diversity. It challenges monocultural models of citizenship by advocating for recognition, participation, and inclusion of marginalized groups based on their distinct identities. In contrast to mere tolerance, multiculturalism emphasizes respect and affirmation of difference, aligning with demands for equity and justice from historically oppressed communities such as Dalits, indigenous peoples, ethnic minorities, religious minorities, and women (Modood, 2008; Latif & Bakar, 2023; Sulyman *et al.*, 2024).

Globally, multiculturalism is closely intertwined with identity politics—often referred to as "the politics of difference"—and seeks to address power asymmetries entrenched in social, legal, and institutional systems that include religious hierarchies (Reddy, 2019). These discourses have profound implications for governance, education, and nation-building, especially in postcolonial and multiethnic states where religion often intersects with ethnicity and law (Milatina *et al.*, 2022; Herdian & Maryanti, 2023; Soelistijo *et al.*, 2024; Saadu, 2023).

In Nepal, multiculturalism has emerged as a powerful discourse, particularly following the democratic movement of 1990. Historically, the country was governed under a centralized and Hindu-dominant cultural framework that marginalized Janjatis (indigenous peoples), Madhesis, Dalits, Muslims, Christians, and non-Hindu minorities. After democratization, minority communities began voicing their claims for recognition, cultural rights, and proportional representation in state institutions (Bhattarai, 2004). These assertions have intensified in the face of globalization, rising political awareness, and growing frustration over entrenched inequalities.

Despite its constitutional commitment to social inclusion, Nepal continues to struggle with caste-based discrimination, gender inequality, religious exclusion, and linguistic marginalization. The privileging of Nepali and English in education and government has silenced many minority languages, while citizenship laws continue to exclude women from full legal agency (Giri, 2010). In addition, certain religious minorities (such as Muslims and Christians) still experience limited access to public employment, political participation, and recognition in state narratives. The result is a society in which access to education, citizenship, employment, and political participation remains stratified along lines of caste, gender, region, and ethnicity (Regmi, 2021).

This paper adopts a multiculturalist lens to critically examine Nepal's socio-political structure, with a specific focus on education and inclusive citizenship. It is grounded in the normative framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), to analyze the extent to which Nepal's current systems promote or inhibit social inclusion. Drawing upon literature from political philosophy, education policy, and Nepali socio-legal analysis, this study aims to contribute to the growing scholarship that links multiculturalism with equitable development and democratic reform.

The novelty of this study lies in its synthesis of policy critique, identity recognition, and educational reform in the context of Nepal's ongoing nation-building project. By examining the systemic exclusion of marginalized groups and highlighting the potential of multicultural education as a tool for civic empowerment, interfaith dialogue, and justice-based governance, the paper seeks to propose actionable pathways for achieving inclusive and sustainable citizenship in Nepal.

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach, using critical literature analysis as its primary method. The paper draws upon multidisciplinary academic sources (including political

philosophy, sociolinguistics, gender studies, education policy, and multicultural theory) to explore the dynamics of multiculturalism in Nepal. Sources were selected to reflect both global perspectives on identity and recognition and localized insights from Nepali scholars and institutional reports.

Data were gathered through a narrative review of peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, census data, and legal frameworks related to language policy, citizenship rights, educational equity, and social inclusion. Emphasis was placed on analyzing how existing policies and structural conditions contribute to the marginalization of communities such as the Dalits, Janjatis, Madhesi, and women.

The paper also integrates the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), as analytical tools to assess Nepal's efforts and gaps in building an inclusive, multicultural society. Through a synthesis of normative theory and empirical evidence, the study aims to provide actionable insights and critical reflections relevant to policy reform and inclusive development.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Nepal, as a multiethnic, multilingual, and multicultural nation, stands at a critical juncture in addressing both historic inequalities and current opportunities for inclusive development. Multiculturalism in Nepal is not merely a reflection of its demographic reality but a political imperative aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). This section discusses the key challenges and transformative possibilities by exploring themes such as language politics, gender and caste discrimination, education inequality, exclusionary citizenship laws, and policy pathways toward inclusive governance.

3.1. Linguistic Inequality and Educational Marginalization

Nepal's 2021 census reveals more than 121 spoken languages, a testament to its linguistic diversity. However, this richness remains largely unrecognized in the country's educational system and official administration. Most public and private schools enforce Nepali or English as the medium of instruction, leading to the exclusion of mother tongues spoken by indigenous and minority groups (Giri, 2010). This not only results in cultural erosion but also contributes to poor academic performance, dropouts, and limited self-expression among marginalized students (Regmi, 2021; Jamiu, 2023).

The privileging of Nepali and English in both education and employment is emblematic of linguistic hegemony. Minority languages are excluded from textbooks, examinations, and classroom communication, leading to a situation where cultural knowledge is undervalued and erased. Dominant groups maintain control over knowledge by promoting their languages and perspectives. This creates a hierarchy of languages that reinforces inequality and undermines SDG 4.5, which calls for inclusive and equitable education for all, especially indigenous and linguistically disadvantaged groups (Fatawi *et al.*, 2024; Farida *et al.*, 2024; Medani & Sakti, 2022; Saadu, 2023).

Furthermore, the inability to access education in one's native language limits cognitive development, self-confidence, and civic participation. Multiculturalism demands not just toleration but public recognition and affirmation of differences—including linguistic identity. The denial of this recognition becomes a structural barrier to both educational justice and national integration.

3.2. Gender-Based Discrimination and Citizenship Inequality

Patriarchal values are embedded not only in Nepalese society but also in its legal frameworks. One of the most critical manifestations of this is Nepal's citizenship law, which discriminates against women by limiting their ability to pass citizenship to their children independently. This undermines the principle of equality enshrined in both the Constitution and SDG 5. It effectively renders thousands of children stateless, denying them access to education, healthcare, and full civic participation (Wahtu & Sakti, 2023; Mulyati & Rasiban, 2021; Boriongan & Abdulmalic, 2023).

In the educational context, girls (particularly from Dalit and Janjati backgrounds) face significant barriers. These include early marriage, gender-based violence, poverty, and the burden of domestic labor, which lead to high dropout rates. Moreover, curricula and teaching practices often reinforce stereotypical gender roles, portraying women in subordinate, passive positions (Reddy, 2019). This restricts their self-worth and aspirations.

Dalit women, in particular, experience triple oppression, as women, as members of a lower caste, and as economic underclasses. The intersection of caste and gender places them at the bottom of social hierarchies. The case of Rupa Sunuwar, denied rental housing based on her caste, illustrates how such systemic discrimination continues in everyday life (Regmi, 2021). In addition to caste and gender, women from religious minority communities (such as Muslim and Christian groups) often face cultural isolation, legal ambiguity, and compounded stigma in both public services and local customs. Their religious identity intersects with gender to deepen social exclusion.

A multicultural and inclusive society must provide equal legal status and public recognition to all citizens, especially those who have been historically excluded or stigmatized (Modood, 2008). In Nepal, this requires reform not only of legal statutes but of the patriarchal mindset that governs institutions and everyday interactions. It also demands religious sensitivity in policy-making to ensure that women from all faith backgrounds enjoy full civic rights and social protection.

3.3. Education as a Site of Inequality and Possibility

While Nepal's literacy rate has reached 77.4% (Sherma, 2025), this figure obscures deep disparities in access, quality, and outcomes. Rural schools often lack infrastructure, trained teachers, and culturally relevant materials. Students from marginalized communities are less likely to attend higher education institutions and more likely to face language barriers, financial hardship, and systemic bias in academic evaluations (Bhattarai, 2004).

Curricula in Nepal have long reflected the values and history of high-caste Hindu elites. Indigenous knowledge systems, oral traditions, and community wisdom are rarely included in school syllabi, leaving minority students feeling invisible and disengaged. This invisibility also extends to religious minorities, whose histories, festivals, values, and cultural contributions are often absent from textbooks and civic education (Pandey, 2018). There is a serious imbalance in the production and dissemination of knowledge, where the excellence of Nepal's few elite institutions coexists with the marginalization of most learners (Regmi, 2021; Pranathi & Kamraju, 2024; Delmata *et al.*, 2024; Situngkir *et al.*, 2024). However, education also offers a path to empowerment. When grounded in multicultural pedagogy, schools can affirm students' identities, foster civic responsibility, and reduce prejudice. SDG 4.7 highlights the importance of education that promotes global citizenship, respect for human rights, and appreciation of cultural diversity. An inclusive curriculum must therefore integrate interfaith understanding, promote mutual respect across religious traditions, and address religious stereotypes that contribute to social division. An inclusive curriculum must therefore integrate interfaith understanding, promote mutual respect across religious traditions, and address religious stereotypes that contribute to social division (Yadav & Khadka, 2020). By reforming curricula and investing in teacher training, Nepal can transform its schools into agents of inclusion rather than assimilation. Religious literacy,

introduced sensitively in classrooms, can also help dismantle prejudice and foster peaceful coexistence, particularly in multi-faith regions where mistrust persists ([Hussain, 2022](#)).

3.4. Employment, Political Patronage, and Exclusion

Nepal's employment practices, particularly in the government and education sectors, are shaped by informal networks, favoritism, and caste-based patronage. Elite groups often secure employment opportunities for their kin and community members, excluding equally or more qualified candidates from marginalized backgrounds. This pattern also affects religious minorities, especially Muslims and Christians, who are underrepresented in public institutions despite constitutional guarantees of equality. Many encounter implicit bias in hiring processes and are rarely seen in leadership roles in education, civil service, or law enforcement ([Pandey, 2018](#)).

Such patterns are replicated in politics. Though the Constitution mandates proportional representation, actual participation by Dalits, Janjatis, and Madhesi is limited. Many political parties field minority candidates merely to fulfill quotas without giving them real decision-making authority or resources. Religious minorities are even more likely to be excluded from party nominations or electoral alliances, often lacking both political visibility and policy influence. This form of tokenism maintains existing power structures under the guise of representation.

These practices violate the principle of inclusive governance promoted by SDG 16, which calls for responsive, accountable, and representative institutions. To dismantle these patterns, Nepal must enforce transparent recruitment policies, protect whistleblowers, and support leadership development among marginalized youth and women. Efforts must also be made to ensure that people of all faiths have equitable access to employment, political appointments, and representation in decision-making bodies. Faith-based civil society organizations can play a strategic role in identifying leadership potential within underrepresented communities.

3.5. Civic Identity and Youth Agency

Nepal's youth population (empowered by education, digital access, and political awareness) has emerged as a transformative force. They are more likely than previous generations to challenge caste hierarchies, gender norms, and ethno-linguistic prejudices. Movements advocating for gender-neutral citizenship, multilingual education, and anti-caste campaigns increasingly originate from student and youth-led platforms ([Sherma, 2025](#)).

Formal education must support this civic energy by promoting critical thinking, intercultural dialogue, and democratic values. Schools should not only transmit information but also foster the capacity to engage with diversity constructively. Extracurricular activities such as debate clubs, cultural exchange forums, and service-learning projects can help cultivate ethical and inclusive citizenship.

Redefining the role of the state to accommodate diverse groups requires not just legal reform but cultural transformation ([Bhattarai, 2004](#)). The classroom is one of the few spaces where this transformation can begin.

3.6. Policy Recommendations for Inclusive Development

To operationalize multiculturalism as a development strategy and fulfill the SDGs, Nepal must implement the following reforms:

- (i) Mother-Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE): Expand and institutionalize mother-tongue instruction, especially at early childhood levels, to preserve identity and improve learning outcomes ([Giri, 2010](#); [Regmi, 2021](#)).

- (ii) Curriculum Revision: Develop inclusive textbooks that reflect the diverse histories, philosophies, and contributions of all communities, including ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities.
- (iii) Citizenship Law Reform: Amend legal provisions to allow mothers equal rights in conferring citizenship, recognizing women's full civic agency.
- (iv) Gender-Sensitive Pedagogy: Train teachers to eliminate gender bias in classrooms and implement equitable learning strategies (Reddy, 2019)
- (v) Transparent Employment Practices: Establish independent commissions to oversee public sector recruitment and enforce diversity targets that include religious representation.
- (vi) Youth and Civic Education: Incorporate modules on intercultural competence, critical media literacy, and democratic participation into school programs (Modood, 2008).
- (vii) Community-Led Governance: Strengthen participatory decision-making in schools and local governments to ensure policy responsiveness to marginalized groups.
- (viii) Interfaith Citizenship Education: Introduce religious literacy and interfaith dialogue into civic education to promote understanding, reduce religious prejudice, and cultivate respect for religious diversity in classrooms and communities (Yadav & Khadka, 2020; Hussain, 2022).
- (ix) Religious Inclusion in Policy Planning: Ensure that policy frameworks at both local and national levels reflect the lived realities and needs of religious minorities, through consultation with faith-based organizations and inclusive baseline data collection (Pandey, 2018).

Multiculturalism in Nepal is more than a demographic fact. It is a constitutional ideal and a developmental necessity. The path toward inclusive education and equitable citizenship must address structural inequalities rooted in language, caste, gender, religion, and region. The SDGs offer both a framework and an international commitment to realize this vision. By transforming its educational systems, legal frameworks, and political culture, Nepal can build a nation where diversity is not merely tolerated but celebrated, protected, and empowered.

4. CONCLUSION

To build a truly inclusive, equitable, and democratic Nepal, multiculturalism must be embraced not only as an ideal but as a concrete policy orientation grounded in the principles of social justice, educational reform, and inclusive citizenship. The structural inequalities rooted in caste, gender, language, religion, and geography continue to disenfranchise large segments of the population, particularly Dalits, Janjatis, Madhesis, religious minorities, and women, from accessing quality education, full legal rights, and meaningful participation in governance and the economy.

This study has shown that the dominance of Nepali and English in education systems, the persistence of patriarchal citizenship laws, and patronage-based employment structures serve as major barriers to achieving SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). Marginalized communities continue to face exclusion, not merely through overt discrimination, but through the normalization of systems that reward conformity to dominant social, cultural, and religious norms.

At the same time, there are clear and actionable opportunities for progress. By expanding mother-tongue-based education, reforming legal frameworks to support gender-equal citizenship, and building school curricula that reflect Nepal's cultural, religious, and historical diversity, the nation can cultivate a stronger, more inclusive civic identity. Furthermore, empowering youth through education in critical thinking, global citizenship, and interfaith understanding can foster a generation committed to dismantling entrenched inequalities.

Ultimately, multiculturalism in Nepal should be viewed not as a threat to national unity but as a strategy for sustainable peace, democratic deepening, and inclusive development. Through sustained dialogue, participatory governance, and equitable education, Nepal has the opportunity

to build a society where every citizen (regardless of caste, ethnicity, gender, religion, or language) feels seen, valued, and empowered to contribute to the nation's future.

5. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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